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ABSTRACT

Portions of a corpus of modern American prose were analyzed for the occurrence of "man" and its compounds. The passages analyzed were written in 1961, and showed no effects of recent movements to "desex" language. Occurrences were classified as generic mixed, generic masculine, and specified masculine. The mean of instances per prose extract is tabulated for various literary categories. Significant correlations between occurrences of certain classifications are listed. A count of total occurrences reveals that generic "man" and its compounds were used infrequently. The discussion of the results focuses on the ambiguity of the use of generic "man." The psychological effect on women of their implied exclusion when generic "man" is used is acknowledged. The use of the generic, when examined in various contexts, is seen to be inconsistent and to reveal more than anything else a lack of awareness of sexist connotations in language usage. (JB)

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MAN AND ITS COMPOUNDS

IN RECENT PREFEMINIST AMERICAN ENGLISH PUBLISHED PROSE

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INTRODUCTION. Historical linguistics originally focused on languages in written form, comparing the earlier and the later in order to document changes which had occurred over long periods of time.* The search for genetic relationships was impossible to carry on by such methodology, however, in the case of unwritten languages, for example, those of the New World, where genetic relationship was established only through the comparative method, using forms transcribed by the investigator, parent language only through the method of reconstruction. Such kinds of work are no doubt what occasioned common belief that language change occurs over so great a period of time as generally to be imperceptible and that it can be studied only diachronically. Among others, Labov (1972) has shattered the latter belief, in studying linguistic change synchronically, and Peng (1976) the former, in reporting changes occurring over a brief timespan.

An excellent opportunity exists at the moment to study a language change--it remains to be demonstrated whether the disruption now apparent will become permanent--in American English through the use or avoidance of generics. Since the great pronoun battle has been an overriding issue of the women's rights movement, in which many female and a few male linguists have interested themselves, it would be well to put the controversy over generics and the resultant language behavior changes into historic perspective, a span of little more than 10 years.

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From the beginning of the recent upsurge of the feminist movement in the United States, perhaps the most salient concern has been the so called "sexist language" (Miller and Swift 1976). On the one hand, there is sentiment that use of feminine forms of certain nouns, for example, poetess, aviatrix, is denigrating; on the other, certain generics, i.e., he and chairman, are perceived by some to exclude the entire female sex. In fact, the latter two have become a shibboleth, outward manifestation of one's views on sexual politics. Much of the breath of feminism and lots of its ink have been expended on the question of "sexist language" in general and on generics in particular (Stanley 1973, Bodine 1976, Thorne and Henley 1975: 28-30, Graham 1975, etc.). Commerical publishers and editors of scholarly journals alike have issued exhortations to remove "sexist language" from writing. Some who have "desexed" their language have done it less from conviction than from the desire to avoid having their speech corrected, for such corrections serve to bring conversation to a halt.

In the 70's, then, once can observe an ongoing, not to say precipitate, language disruption deliberately forced by social pressure. We intend ultimately to describe the potential linguistic change by a comparison of generics, words which denote groups or classes rather than individuals, at the margins of what is, in historical terms, a very short period: 1961 and 1975-78, points before and after the feminist upsurge made itself felt. Specifically, we intend to determine the denotation and distribution of the following generics: (1) the pronouns we, you, they, and one; (2) nouns, together with following pronouns; (3) man and its compounds; (4) the construction composed of definite article plus adjective; and (5) indefinites, in order to see what changes, if any, have occurred. Because of limitations of space, the present paper will report only on the denotation and distribution of man and its compounds in the prefeminist period.

MATERIALS AND METHODS. Materials. It is clearly impossible to reconstruct speech, but writing, fortunately, leaves a permanent record. We used the Brown University Standard Corpus of Present-Day American English Prose, a random stratified sample, consisting of slightly more than one million words, of the prose copyrighted in the United States in 1961, in order to extract the instances of man and compounds of man. The Brown Corpus is divided into two major categories: Informative Prose, with the nine subcategories A--Press-Reportage, B--Press-Editorial, C--Press-Review, D--Religion, E--Skills, Hobbies, F--Popular Lore, G--Belles Lettres, H--Miscellaneous, and J--Learned, and Imaginative Prose, with the six subcategories K--General, L--Mystery, Detective, M--Science, N--Adventure, Western, P--Romance, Love, and R--Humor. The extracts which compose the 15 subcategories are designed to be approximately 2,000 words in length. We examined three random stratified subsamples of the Corpus, slightly more than 300,000 words.

Methods. Three denotations of man and its compounds were identified: Mixed sex generic (referring to both women and men); masculine generic (referring to men only); and specified (referring to individuals identifiable within the text). Within each of the three denotations, singular and plural were tabulated separately. In addition, within the group "man singular mixed sex" the mass noun, i.e., that used without indefinite article, was tabulated separately from the count noun. The initial count of half the samples was made by one or the other of the investigators, with the other rereading and verifying. Thus, there was substantial agreement on classification of examples.

RESULTS. Since there are differing numbers of examples in the various categories and subcategories of the Brown Corpus, depending on the proportion of the category to the total copyrighted prose output in 1961, it would be misleading to present sums of instances of man and its compounds. We chose to present the information as the mean of instances per extract. Table 1 presents the data for the major categories Informative and Imaginative Prose.

CATEGORY	GENERIC MIXED					GENERIC MASCULINE				SPECIFIED MASCULINE			
	Man			Cmpd		Man		Cmpd		Man		Cmpd	
	S		Pl	S	Pl	S	Pl	S	Pl	S	Pl	S	Pl
	Ct	Ms											
INFORMATIVE	.16	.29	.36	.27	.23	.30	.34	.05	.11	.61	.84	.38	.15
IMAGINATIVE	.29	.24	.24	.12	.05	.34	.61	.03	.08	2.26	.16	.26	.16

Table 1

Mean Occurrence of Man and Compounds of Man
in Informative and Imaginative Prose

Table 2 shows the same information for the subcategories.

CATEGORY Subcategory	GENERIC MIXED					GENERIC MASCULINE				SPECIFIED MASCULINE			
	Man			Cmpd		Man		Cmpd		Man		Cmpd	
	S		Pl	S	Pl	S	Pl	S	Pl	S	Pl	S	Pl
	Ct	Ms											
INFORMATIVE													
A-Press-Reporting	.33	.08	.00	.25	.25	.08	.08	.00	.08	.80	.08	.42	.33
B-Press-Editorial	.38	.13	.13	.25	.00	.13	.25	.00	.50	1.50	.25	.17	.25
C-Press-Review	.00	.00	.20	.00	.00	.60	.20	.00	.00	.80	.60	.00	.00
D-Religion	.50	.75	1.50	.25	.20	.00	.20	.00	.50	.40	.20	.20	.20
E-Skills, Hobbies	.18	.18	.00	.18	.11	.00	.00	.00	.09	.00	.00	.00	.00
F-Popular Lore	.13	.63	.44	.25	.44	.94	.63	.06	.13	.44	.50	.44	.43
G-Belles Lettres	.17	.30	.39	.17	.09	.83	.57	.04	.04	.91	.09	.43	.04
H-Misc.	.27	.00	.73	.31	.27	.09	1.20	.00	.00	.73	.36	.27	.09
J-Learned	.04	.35	.52	.22	.27	.09	.09	.00	.04	.24	.43	.04	.04
IMAGINATIVE													
K-General	.44	.22	.00	.11	.11	.33	.55	.00	.11	1.10	1.70	.11	.00
L-Mystery, Detective	.00	.00	.00	.40	.00	.40	.40	.00	.00	3.60	2.60	.60	.00
M-Science	.00	.00	2.00	.00	.00	1.50	.00	.00	1.00	1.50	.00	.00	.00
N-Adventure, Western	.44	.00	.44	.00	.11	.33	.78	.00	.00	2.80	1.80	.22	.00
P-Romance, Love	.00	.00	.10	.10	.00	.00	.60	.00	.00	1.90	.20	.33	.10
R-Humor	.33	.00	.00	.00	.00	.50	1.00	.25	.00	2.70	.00	.33	1.30

Table 2

Mean Occurrence of Man and Compounds of Man
in Subcategories of Prose

Inspection of table 2 shows a marked difference between extreme cases. Within Informative prose, for example, subcategory D--Religion appears to have relatively more instances and subcategory C--Press-Review relatively few. As between the two categories Informative and Imaginative prose, inspection furthermore shows that Informative has more generics, mixed and masculine, and Imaginative has more specified uses of man and its compounds. In between such extremes, inspection cannot easily be used to make comparisons of the types of prose represented in the Corpus. For this purpose, we first made 3 rank orders of each of the 13 variables (the column heads of tables 1 and 2). We then ranked the subcategories on the variables by grouping those of Informative prose, those of Imaginative prose, and finally those of the entire sample and determined their relationship by calculating Spearman rho for each pair of variables in each of the three orders. Table 3 displays the rank order correlations which were found to be significant.

GROUP	VARIABLES		SIGNIFICANCE LEVEL	
INFORMATIVE	Gen Masc Cmpd Sing	Gen Masc Sing	.024	+
	Gen Masc Cmpd Sing	Spec Cmpd Sing	.025	+
	Spec Cmpd Pl	Spec Cmpd Sing	.027	+
IMAGINATIVE	Gen Masc Pl Cmpd	Spec Cmpd Sing	.029	-
	Gen Mixed Sing Count	Gen Mixed Cmpd Pl	.016	+
ALL	Gen Mixed Sing Mass	Gen Masc Cmpd Pl	.016	+
	Gen Mixed Sing Mass	Spec Sing	.006	-
	Gen Mixed Sing Mass	Gen Mixed Cmpd Pl	.021	+
	Spec Sing	Gen Mixed Cmpd Pl	.004	-
	Gen Masc Sing	Gen Masc Cmpd Sing	.043	+
	Gen Masc Pl	Gen Masc Cmpd Pl	.037	-
	Gen Masc Pl	Spec Cmpd Sing	.032	+

Table 3

Significant Rank Order Correlations
for Three Groups of Variable Pairings

Finally, we grouped together all instances of generic mixed, of masculine generic, and of specified, to determine relative frequencies across the entire 300,000+ words of the Corpus we examined.

	GENERIC MIXED	GENERIC MASC	SPECIFIED	GENERIC MASC AND SPECIFIED
Instances	192	133	290	423
% of Total	31%	22%	47%	69%

Table 4

Distribution of Three Combined Variables

DISCUSSION. In collecting examples of the use of man and compounds of man in prefeminist American English prose, we were fully aware that denotation, i.e., primary reference, is social--language being first of all a social phenomenon--but at the same time profoundly personal. Words are on paper, to be sure, but they act as stimulus to the reader, for meaning resides ultimately within the human being: The meaning that one generates from a given text is crucially dependent on what one brings to it. Thus, a person who believes himself excluded by man and its compounds, whether singular or plural, whether followed by forms of he, is automatically excluded by all the instances we report in tables 1-4. If we had held such a view, we would simply have done a computer search of the Corpus and presented the number 615, the tokens of the total of types, which includes 30 compounds.

As with man, so with, for example, policeman: The reader may perceive himself excluded by either half of the compound. Besides the fact that the entire past history of the reader bears on the reference of a word, experience is constantly being enlarged; the 1978 meaning of a term for an individual may not be the same as that of 1961 or that of 1971. So, information on denotation must be derived in part from the study of denotation for individuals, and in that respect the denotation of, say, serviceman, will doubtless change across time for a proportion of them.

We ourselves chose to operate on the hypothesis that man and related forms can indeed function unmarked for gender; under this theory, the forms cannot be decoded accurately as isolates or in isolates sentences. The first contextual restriction on the occurrence of the unmarked form is obvious: That the form not denote a

specified male or males. Beyond the obvious, the unmarked forms will co-occur with two other contextual clues: (1) Logical applicability to both sexes, and (2) interchange with other generics referring to human beings but not including those marked for other features such as lawyer and teacher. The following passage illustrates man as generic denoting both sexes:

> When a person meets God's requirements for the experience of forgiveness he is forgiven. God's mercy and patience will last forever. Forgiveness implies more than a person wanting his past sins covered by God's love. It also implies that a man wants his future to be free from the mistakes of the past. We want the past forgiven, but at the same time 730-80 B08*

Here no specific males are referred to, there is logical applicability to both sexes, and there is an interchange of generics (a person, a man, and we), making it impossible for us to conclude that, however much a given reader might prefer some other noun to man, he should not feel that the phrase a man as used here was intended to denote only males.

On the other hand, some generic instances of the use of man and its forms do seem to denote males only, as in the following example, where there is logical applicability to both sexes but exclusive use of the generic men:

> . . . to seek solutions for those evils for all Western men--until today--, in the industrialized West, these social evils substantially do not exist. The solutions were not arrived at by men of government--lawyers, most of them--and men of business. These were educated men 1250-1290 H25*

We encountered very few surprises in the 300,000 words we analyzed. There were no instances of singular generic man, either as mass or count noun, or of a singular compound of man which were followed by any pronoun other than he, i.e., no they's. There were likewise no instances of compounds with person, such as chairperson, which has apparently sprung full blown since 1961. Because the prose we read was far more occupied with men than with women, we cannot generalize about compounds with woman, except to note that we found scarcely any. In one extract,

*Line, subcategory, and extract reference to the Corpus.

there is general commentary on the bad habits of "congressmen," but a reference to "Congresswoman Church, bless her heart," (1630-40 B16). Congresswoman Church's heart is being blessed because she does not share in the general laxity of congressmen. "Councilwoman Virginia Knauer" is also mentioned (820-30 A09). A single writer betrays indecision, or more likely demonstrates that one cannot generalize about the reference of compounds when he refers to a Mrs. Greenfield at once as "state chairman of the Republican Women for Jones Committee" and as a "Westfield county committeewoman" (860-900 A06). Such extension of meaning of compounds of man may perhaps provide additional evidence to support the contention that they can in given circumstances denote more than males. A horse was called gentleman (460 E09), as was a dog (670 G41); there was a reference to sportsmanship which included names of females only (1300 H28).

As for the statistical summaries, the most obvious point is that instances of generic man and its compounds are in any case infrequent. Only 6 of the forms of mixed sex generics have a 50/50 chance of occurring in 2,000 words of text, only 10 masculine generics with equal chance. The rank order correlation studies, with statistically significant correlations presented in table 3, indicate that in general, the forms of man and -man do not co-occur. The greater number of correlations which resulted when Informative and Imaginative prose were grouped together demonstrates that the notional grouping into the major categories does not totally reflect the linguistic reality, for some from each of the two categories more nearly resemble extracts from the other than of their own, a fact shown earlier in a study of the distribution of the perfect (Dubois 1972). It is interesting to note that of the 24 variable slots in table 3, 14 (58 percent) are occupied by compounds, although compounds constitute less than half (46 percent) of the number of variables studied.

To be reported in subsequent papers are similar studies on the other language forms listed in the Introduction, together with correlation studies of co-occurrence of all forms. Completed studies will constitute a description of the meaning and distribution of generics in prefeminist American English prose, which can serve as a baseline for studies of similar linguistic phenomena in postfeminist prose. A change in either meaning or distribution will demonstrate the power of the women's movement to influence linguistic behavior, which would be important evidence of the spread of the movement. A decrease in the ratio of specified masculine denotation would indicate something, in our eyes, even more important: That women are coming to occupy positions of greater importance in America, as reflected in her edited prose.

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